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S E C R E T MANAMA 000344

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [ASEC](#) [BA](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER WARNS OF IRANIAN INTERFERENCE IN
BAHRAIN

REF: A. MANAMA 281 (NOTAL)

[B](#). MANAMA 270 (NOTAL)

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

[1](#). (C) Foreign Minister/Deputy Prime Minister Shaikh Mohammed bin Mubarak Al Khalifa told the Ambassador March 7 that Minister of Interior Shaikh Rashed briefed members of Parliament March 6 on Iranian interference in Bahrain's Ashura celebrations in February. Shaikh Rashed told Parliamentarians there were Hizballah flags and photographs of Khomeini and Khamenei posted outside Shia assembly halls ("ma'tams") and along the procession route. The MPs reacted well, understanding the distinction between religious and political activities.

[2](#). (S) The Foreign Minister told the Ambassador that he had called in the Iranian Ambassador to protest these actions. The Iranian apologized, saying he was embarrassed and would advise his government. The Foreign Minister said that advising his government was not enough; he must inform them that such interference was harming bilateral relations. (Note: See Ref B for Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Abdul Ghaffar's protest to the Ambassador about Iranian interference in Bahrain. End Note.)

[3](#). (C) In response to the Ambassador's question, Shaikh Mohammed said that the Iranian hand was much more evident during Ashura celebrations this year than in previous years. He said that senior Shia Bahraini cleric Issa Qassem spoke publicly flanked by large photographs of Khomeini, Khamenei, and even Hizballah SecGen Nasrallah. Bodyguards were posted around Qassem as if he were a political, not religious, figure. He said that in the past, the Shia had kept the photos inside their ma'tams; this year they were everywhere. The Shia had tried to "blanket" Bahrain with black flags. (Comment: Many black flags were placed in intentionally provocative locations, including directly across the street from the largest Sunni mosque in the northwest of the island, in Saar. End Comment.)

[4](#). (C) Shaikh Mohammed claimed that several Bahraini Shia had come to the government to complain about Iranian interference in the celebrations. He said they protested imposition on Bahrainis of the concept of the "velayat-e faqih," or rule by the jurisprudent, the doctrinal basis for Iran's clerical rule. Shaikh Mohammed said, "Khamenei is not a religious leader; he is a political leader. He is commander-in-chief of the Iranian army."

[5](#). (C) The Foreign Minister expressed his concern that extremists are abusing Bahrain's freedom. Iranians were using agents to incite people, hoping to create a "fifth column" inside Bahrain. The government had to react now before things became worse. Bahrain had faced similar challenges before, from communists and Baathists. "We want a peaceful region, and do not want Iran to pull us backward," Shaikh Mohammed said. He warned that these activities could allow extremists to "hatch" terrorism inside Bahrain. He said that in Muharraq (a district to the east of Manama), Sunnis and Shias almost had a clash over the placement of flags and other religious symbols in sensitive locations.

[6](#). (C) Shaikh Mohammed complained that the administrators of the Bahrain On-Line website who were detained in late February (Ref A) were trying to stir up trouble. He continued that one day after Minister of Labor Majid Al Alawi gave a presentation on Bahrain to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in Geneva, two or three activists who "have nothing to do here" claimed publicly that the GOB discriminates against Shia. This is not true, the Foreign Minister said, and Alawi presented evidence that Shia have good jobs, including in managerial positions at the Alba aluminum company. The Ambassador responded that Iran is no friend of ours, and that we support efforts to control extremism and calm tensions. However, freedom of expression is a critical principle of democracy, and the government should be able to absorb criticism. Shaikh Mohammed responded that Bahrain is a small country that cannot function living with tension every day.

MONROE